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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on the 1985 Association of American Colleges' report, "Integrity in the College Curriculum," are presented, with attention to connections between the report and ideas from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Using quotes from philosophers and scholars, attention is directed to: why the report was written and what it is about, how the report was received, and weaknesses of the report. The report claims there is a crisis in American education, a decay in the college course of study, and an indifference on the part of faculty who focus more on academic careers than on teaching. The report identifies nine experiences basic to a coherent undergraduate education. This paper argues that the report says nothing new, and the notions about the curriculum are distillations of ideas promoted by faculties of today and yesterday. Views about the report are supported by the positions of thinkers such as Dewey, Newton, and Henry Adams. The following views are presented: the report is not in the main current of intellectual thought; listing curricular essentials is an act of futility; the report is not grounded in a sensible notion of history; and the report provides scant evidence of any recognition of fundamental changes in the world and people's perceptions of it. (SW)

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# THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF "INTEGRITY IN THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM"

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# The Unbearable Lightness of "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

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My intention

To react to "Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community" in terms of the connections between it and some irresistible ideas from the nineteenth century and twentieth century.

My Perspective

There is no truth here; there are only perceptions. For as Arnold Toynbee has said

> Evidently his nationality, his social milieu, and his age, between them, will in large measure determine the standpoint from which he views the world panorama. In fact, like each and all of us, he is more or less the slave of historical relativity. The only personal advantage that he can claim is that he happens to be a historian, and is therefore at least aware that he himself is a piece of sentient flotsam on the eddying surface of the stream of time. Realizing this he knows that his fleeting and fragmentary vision of the passing scene is no more than a caricature of the surveyor's chart. God alone knows the true picture. Our individual human apercus are shots in the dark.[1]

Why the report was written

a. Mark Curtis said "Integrity in the College Curriculum" germinated in the mid 1970's. It was nurtured by continuing discussion with many people who, on the basis of involvement in a multitude of curriculum projects, were convinced that there was "considerable disjunction in the curriculum" and "anxiety on campus" about the role of the humanities. It was jolted to life by the one third of a million dollar generosity of an interested foundation. The intended audience was faculty members. The hope was that they would "get religion."[2]

b. Milan Kundera said

> Graphomania (an obsession with writing books) takes on the proportion of a mass epidemic whenever a society develops to the point where it can provide three basic conditions:

1. a high enough degree of general well-being to enable people to devote their energies to useless activities;

2. an advanced state of social atomization and the resultant general feeling of the isolation of the individual;

3. a radical absence of significant social change in the internal development of the nation. (In this connection I find it symptomatic that in France, a country where nothing really happens, the percentage of writers is twenty-one times higher than in Israel. Bibi was absolutely right when she claimed never to have experienced anything from the outside. It is this absence of content, this void, that powers the motor driving her to write.)

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The proliferation of mass graphomania among politicians, cab drivers, women on the delivery table, mistresses, murderers, criminals, prostitutes, police chiefs, doctors, and patients proves to me that every individual without exception bears a potential writer within himself and that all mankind has every right to rush out into the streets with a cry of "We are all writers!"

The reason is that everyone has trouble accepting the fact that he will disappear unheard of and unnoticed in an indifferent universe, and everyone wants to make himself into a universe of words before it's too late.

Once the writer in every individual comes to life (and that time is not far off), we are in for an age of universal deafness and lack of understanding.[3]

What the report is

"Integrity in the College Curriculum" is the attempt of a group of people, gathered in a large committee, to address what they define and accept as "the crisis in American education as it is revealed in the decay in the college course of study and in the role of college faculties in creating and nurturing that decay."[4] It is about decay, blame, and guilt. Not a pretty sight.

The authors anguish about "the transformation of the professors from teachers concerned with the characters and minds of their students to professionals, scholars with Ph.D. degrees with an allegiance to academic disciplines stronger than their commitment to teaching or to the life of the institutions where they are employed."[5] They worry about "Who takes responsibility . . . for the curriculum as a whole?"[6] They fret about their belief that "Inertia is the style with which faculties move from day to day,

from year to year."[7] Like a collective, disillusioned, bitter Henry Adams, they see that everything is changing—is going wrong—around them. But even in the wasteland of decay and fragmentation, there is a glimmer of hope in the grail of coherence:

> We do not believe that the road to a coherent undergraduate education can be constructed from a set of required subjects or academic disciplines. We do believe that there are methods and processes, modes of access to understanding and judgment, that should inform all study.[8]

And they offer nine "experiences" as "basic to a coherent undergraduate education"[9]: 1. Inquiry, abstract logical thinking, critical analysis. 2. Literacy: writing, reading, speaking, listening. 3. Understanding numerical data. 4. Historical consciousness. 5. Science. 6. Values. 7. Art. 8. International and multicultural experiences. 9. Study in depth.[10] Not much to argue about in that list.

To assure that students have such basic experiences, someone must do something about "One of the most remarkable and scandalous aspects of American higher education [which] is the absence of traditions, practices, and methods of institutional and social accountability."[11] Further, someone must make faculty members understand that "The first obligation of a college teacher must . . . be to the profession of teaching."[12]

If nobody does anything, "The public at large and the academic community itself" will continue to be "uneasy with the evidence of the decline and devaluation of the bachelor's degree in the recent past." And worse. If nothing is done, "The widespread critical assault on all aspects of American education" will continue, and "lost support" will not be regained."[13]

How the report was received

> . . . the report does not pretend to offer evidence about anything; it is largely a speculative piece rather than a comprehensive study of actual institutional practice across the country.[14]

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> When the panelists and I went to college, we were among the privileged 5 per cent. The world has changed since then. Times have changed. The student body has changed, and it will never be the same again.
>
> . . . If they want to make a significant commentary on contemporary higher education, they will have to do more than reminisce in a historical vacuum.[15]

A musing about method

> One day a great man determined that after a thousand years the language of music had worn itself out and could do no more than rehash the same message. Abolishing the hierarchy of tones by revolutionary decree, he made them all equal and subjected them to a strict discipline: none was allowed to occur more often than any other in a piece, and therefore none could lay claim to its former feudal privileges. All courts were permanently abolished, and in their place arose a single empire, founded on equality and called the twelve-tone system.
>
> Perhaps the sonorities were more interesting than they had been, but audiences accustomed to following the courtly intrigues of the keys for a millennium failed to make anything of them. In any case, the empire of the twelve-tone system soon disappeared. After Schonberg came Varese, and he abolished notes (the tones of the human voice and musical instruments) along with keys, replacing them with an extremely subtle play of sounds which, though fascinating, marks the beginning of the history of something other than music, something based on other principles and another language.
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> **********
>
> In the days when Arnold Schonberg founded his twelve-tone empire, music was richer than ever before and intoxicated with its freedom. No one ever dreamed the end was so near. No fatigue. No twilight. Schonberg was audacious as only youth can be. He was legitimately proud of having chosen the only road that led "onward." The history of music came to an end in a burst of daring and desire.[16]

What the report is not

The report is not original, except in the ordering of words. It says nothing new; likely it will not be remembered. The ideas are nostalgic, if not just old. Professors have been whipped before, and administrators have been implored to be bold in vision before. Institutional inertia is not a new devil. And the particular notions about the curriculum are distillations of ideas promoted by countless faculties of today and yesterday. Parts of Alverno, Harvard, Chicago, Columbia, and others. There is some Dewey, some

James, some Nott, some Day, some Jefferson. Bits and pieces and echoes from the past, processed and packaged neatly.

The report is not emotionally satisfying. There is a qualitative difference in reading "Integrity in the College Curriculum" and in reading of The Yale Report or Eliot's inaugrual or Experience in Education. I suspect the difference has to do with Eros, the Greek god of love. There is a sense of duty about the report, a sense of controlled obligation. It is an ending only. Its little passion is formulaic. Its propriety reminds me of these lines:

> At the beginning of man's erotic life, Jan said to himself, there is arousal without climax; at the end there is climax without arousal.
>
> Arousal without climax is Daphnis; climax without arousal was the girl from the sporting goods rental place.
>
> A year ago, when he first met her and invited her back to his apartment, she came out with an unforgettable statement. "I'm sure it will be good technique-wise; emotion-wise, though, I don't know."[17]

The report is not in the main current of intellectual thought. The sort of curricular integrity the authors desire would demand an unlikely degree of coherence. From many streams, which began as trickles in the mid nineteenth century and have become a torrent in the late twentieth century, come the message that logical connections, congruities, and consistencies are exceptions. In their quite different ways Darwin, Dewey, and Einstein taught us about transformation, about change, not permanence. The fact that change makes us uncomfortable cannot change what we know.

The influence of Darwinism on philosophy was profound, as Dewey says so well: "The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals and life."[18] Darwin headed an "intellectual revolt and introduced a new intellectual temper." He did so by "laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency" when in the Origin of Species he "introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was

bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion."[19]

The sacred ark of permanency received a death blow from Einstein and other theoretical physicists in the early twentieth century. Newton's safe universe was shattered, even if God were not dead as Nietzsche claimed:

> Newton's universe was constructed from a set of basic entities with certain fundamental properties, which had been created by God and thus were not amenable to further analysis. In one way or another, this notion was implicit in all theories of natural science until the bootstrap hypothesis stated explicity that the world cannot be understood as an assemblage of entities which cannot be analyzed further. In the new world view, the universe is seen as a dynamic web of interrelated events. None of the properties of any part of this web is fundamental; they all follow from the properties of the other parts, and the overall consistency of their mutual interrelations determines the structure of the entire web.[20]

This is to suggest that the day of the essentialists is past. The ghosts of Barr, Buchanan, Hutchins, and the others should rest in peace; their work is done. And a new essentialism based on prescribed experiences--"We believe that the following nine experiences are essential . . . ."[21]--suffers from the same intellectual flaw as an essentialism based on a prescribed body of knowledge. Both fail to account for the new world view in which "the universe is seen as a dynamic web of interrelated events" and in which "None of the properties of any part of this web is fundamental."[22] (If theoretical physicists have shown that the world is one of dynamic unity, that everything in the pulsating web is connected, the listing of any curricular essentials is, ultimately, an act of futility. What, then, can those who would do something about the curriculum do? I don't know for sure, but I think it would be helpful to stop making lists. Maybe we should pay more attention to the process of learning. I do know it doesn't make sense to keep constructing secondary unity schemes when we can't or won't accept the fundamental unity of the universe.)

The report is not grounded in a sensible notion of history. The acceleration of history caused Henry Adams great despair, but at least he understood it:

> The movement from unity into multiplicity, between 1200 and 1900, was unbroken in sequence, and rapid in acceleration. Prolonged one generation longer, it would require a new social mind. As though thought were common salt in indefinite solution it must enter a new phase subject to new laws. Thus far, since five or ten thousand years, the mind had successfully reacted, and nothing yet proved that it would fail to react--but it would need to jump.[23]

Adams knew that the world was changing, not necessarily progressing but changing. The authors of "Integrity in the College Curriculum" provide scant evidence of any recognition of fundamental changes in the world and people's perceptions of it. Nostalgia is the right word; the report is nostalgic. The authors want us to return, but we cannot:

> The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! What does this mad myth signify?
>
> Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing. We need take no more note of it than of a war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world, even if a hundred thousands blacks perished in excruciating torment.
>
> Will the war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century itself be altered if it recurs again and again, in eternal return?
>
> It will: it will become a solid mass, permanently protuberant, its inanity irreparable.
>
> If the French Revolution were to recur eternally, French historians would be less proud of Robespierre. But because they deal with something that will not return, the bloody years of the Revolution have turned into mere words, theories, and discussions, have become lighter than feathers, frightening no one. There is an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads.[24]

We are stuck with out demographic realities, our politics, our budgets. The regrouping that we want to do cannot be like the general education regroupings that followed World War I, World War II, and Vietnam. The bachelor's degree cannot mean what it used to mean. There are no good old

days. Henry Adams is correct in suggesting we need minds that "jump" not just "react." Where are the national reports written by people with such minds?

Conclusion

"Integrity in the College Curriculum" is the result of multiple impulses, which gave rise to multiple reasons. Since the report is not original, is not emotionally satisfying, is not in the main current of intellectual thought, and is not grounded in a sensible notion of history, I face this inexorable conclusion: The report in large measure flows from the truth that "everyone has trouble accepting the fact that he will disappear unheard of and unnoticed in an indifferent universe."[25]

> This entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into the distance.[26]

Notes

[1]Arnold Toynbee, Civilization on Trial (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 16.

[2]I spoke by telephone with Mark Curtis on 6 January 1986. He is the former president of the Association of American Colleges and was the chairman of the committee which issued "Integrity in the College Curriculum."

[3]Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 92, 106.

[4]"Integrity in the College Curriculum," reprinted in The Chronicle of Higher Education, 13 February 1985, p. 12.

[5]"Integrity," p. 14.

[6]Ibid.

[7]"Integrity," p. 16.

[8]"Integrity," p. 18.

[9]Ibid.

[10]"Integrity," pp. 18-22.

[11]"Integrity," p. 28.

[12]"Integrity," p. 29.

[13]"Integrity," p. 30.

[14]Gary H. Quehl, letter to the editor, The Chronicle of Higher Education, 27 March 1985, p. 36.

[15]Norbert J. Hruby, letter to the editor, The Chronicle of Higher Education, 27 March 1985, p. 36.

[16]Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, pp. 178-179.

[17]Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, p. 204.

[18]John Dewey, The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910), pp. 8-9.

[19]Dewey, pp. 1-2.

[20]Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1975), p. 286.

[21]"Integrity," p. 18.

[22]Capra, p. 286.

[23]Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961 Gentry Edition), p. 468. First published in 1907.

[24]Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being (New York: Harper Colophon, 1985), pp. 3-4.

[25]Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, p. 106.

[26]Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, p. 165.